

The Jews of Ukraine: Past and Present

by Yuliana Smilianskaya, Institute for Jewish Studies, Kiev

ABSTRACT

A large number of Jewish communities as well as non-profit and cultural organizations have been established in Ukraine since 1991. Restored and new synagogues serve as religious and cultural centers. The Jewish institutions focus their efforts on the integration of the history of the Ukrainian Jews into the historical memory of Ukraine. Ukrainian Jews also protested on Maidan Square.

I. HISTORICAL REVIEW

The first archeological evidence of the presence of a Jewish population in today's Ukraine is related to artifacts from the first century, found by archeologists on the Crimean peninsula; they present a view of the life of Jewish communities the Greek cities of Panticapaeum, Chersonese, and Kafē¹. The next stage of the dissemination of Judaism in Ukrainian lands² is connected to the history of the Khazar Kaganate, which existed as an independent state from the 7th to 10th century, but kept "shards" of the state in view, to include Jewish communities, right up until the middle of the 9th century.

Parallel to the Jewish communities of Khazar are Jewish "merchant-radonites", appearing towards the 10th century, migrating along the trade route "from the Vikings to the Greeks." The first document to have fixed the presence of a Jewish community in Kiev is the famous "Kievan Letter," which narrates the tragic events of the brothers Khanuka, with regard to the 10th century³. There are also allusions to this in ancient Russian chronicles, notes of the traveler Ptakhia of Regensburg, and other testimonies, which allow us to confidently converse about the entirety of Jewish life in the

1 Theodoseus

2 The term, "Ukrainian Lands," in this article refers to territories that compose the modern state of Ukraine.

3 Golb, Norman and Omeljan Pritsak. *Khazarian Hebrew Documents of the Tenth Century*. — Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982

hills of Kiev from the 10th to the first half of the 12th century. The sacking and destruction of Kiev in 1240 by the Mongol-Tatars practically led to the annihilation of life in the city altogether, to say nothing of the Jewish communities in particular.

The following period of active Jewish life is connected with the Lithuanian Principality, the Kingdom of Poland, and, later on, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The role of Jewish communities in these states, which had at this time taken Ukrainian lands into the fold, was great. Lithuanian princes, Polish kings, and the Szlachta invited Jews to their lands, understanding that they would be capable of regulating trade after a long disruption in the newly revived cities, towns, and castles. Thanks to this, more than 200 Jewish communities flourished in Ukraine in the 12th century and were practically autonomous, having their own "parliament" (VAAD of the four lands) and education system. This period left behind a wealth of material evidence, which can be seen while traveling around Ukraine: defensive synagogues in Shargorod and Zhovkva, fragments of fortress walls and the Reznitskaya Tower in Kamenets-Podol'sky, Jewish urban development in Shargorod, Murovannye Kurilovtsy, and Bershad, "matseivy" (headstones) in numerous Jewish cemeteries (Bus'k, Brody, Khotin, Kremenets, Satanov, Medzhibozh, and many others). This was a time of blooming for Jewish culture,

education, and learning. Youths studied in world-famous yeshivas, famous rabbis were writing their masterworks, and philosophical schools gave birth to new ideas.

From time to time, Jewish life was rent with catastrophes. For example, during the Khmel-nitsky uprising (or Koliyivshchyna), flowering communities were annihilated, cut off, and razed to the ground. However, after some time, they again revived themselves, creating new material and spiritual values. In the 18th century, in the city of Medzhibozh, a direction of Judaism was formed by the famous tzaddick Baal-Shem-Tov, which today is one of the most the most widespread amongst the Jews of the world. In the following quarter of the century, Hassidism was disseminated in hundreds of European communities. Having been formed in the second half of the 18th century, this institute of tzaddicks defined the structure of the spiritual life of Russian and Polish Jews up until the 20th century.

At the turn of the 19th century, after the second and third divisions of Poland, a large part of the Ukrainian lands, along with the Polish Jews inhabiting them, were assimilated into the Russian Empire. The next stage of the existence of Jewish communities was beginning "in the Galut." Before this point, Jews were not allowed to live in the Russian Empire. Therefore, the situation of the Jewish population in the country was complicated. A large number of limitations, bans on different forms of leadership, and limited places in which they were allowed to live ("boundary of settlement") demonstrated to the Orthodox population the inferiority and even hostility of the Jews for more than a hundred years. Emperor Nikolai I (1825-1855) led especially rigid political motions aimed at the assimilation of the Jewish population into the Empire. After his death, under the rule of the tsar-reformer Alexander

II, the anti-Jewish politics of the state began to slacken and a series of privileged groups began to appear (merchants, persons with higher education, etc.), which were allowed to live outside of the "boundary of settlement."

The gradual process of the "ingrowth" of Jewish community into leadership in the Russian Empire (before 1793, this leadership was absolutely foreign to Jews, and therefore it took several decades for Jews living in Ukrainian, Belorussian, and Polish lands to sort out which state they had settled into and how to exist within it. A large part of the Jewish population, as in the past, remained in the "boundary of settlement," but those who overcame the prohibition and found themselves in big cities began to form a special class of "enlightened" or "wealthy" Jews. The money of Jewish philanthropists funded hospitals and universities, schools and theaters, museums and markets. Their children were successfully graduating from universities and academies and becoming doctors, lawyers, and engineers (Max Emmanuel Mandelstam, Semyon An-sky, Arnold Margolin). Their grandchildren were journalists, writers, musicians, and artists (Vladimir Gorovicz, Avo Pevzner, Isaac Rabinovich, Abraham Manevich). And it would appear that it was now possible to talk about the new vector of development for "Galut Jewry," but waves of horrific massacres in 1881-82 and, later, in 1903-05, the people were repeatedly reminded that they were still regarded as foreign to the lands, on which only a few generations of their ancestors had lived.

The revolution changed the situation, for the first time equalizing Jewish rights with those of everyone else living in the country. However, a wave of bloody riots during the period of the Russian Civil War brought colossal losses to the Jewish population, and the Soviet authorities utterly destroyed the structure of

the Jewish community. The struggle with religion, the closing of the synagogue, which for centuries had been the core of Jewish spiritual life, and a ban on the teaching of Hebrew (both those who taught as well as those who sent their children to be taught their mother tongue were landed in jail) all put an end to the next phase of "Galut Life."

However, within the first years of Soviet power, the state declared a course towards "internationalism" and "root-taking," which is to say in support of all peoples living in the country, to include the "previously oppressed Jewry." The first half of the 1920s became the beginning of the rapid development of Yiddish life and culture. Artists and musicians, Jewish theaters, studios, and clubs formed the model of the new "Soviet" Jew; Jewish collective farms in the step region of Crimea and in the South of Ukraine were called forth to change the stereotype of the humiliated "petty bourgeois trader" into that of the proud Soviet farmer—Jewish schools, books, and theaters were required to teach the "new Jewish proletariat." Such politics, from the receiving side, appeared so attractive, that Jewish international organizations (especially Joint) actively supported them, supplying Jewish collective farms with the newest technology and considerable monetary subsidies⁴. However, in the 1930s, the "course of the Party" changed decisively from support of national culture to the formation of the "Soviet man," ideally without any national (nationalistic) indications. The head of Joint and the active officials of the "Ga-khaluts" movement espe-

⁴ For a short period in the arid steppe zone of Crimea, 163 wells were constructed, 97 villages were established, 2900 homes were built, up to 200 collective households and civil buildings were built, 16 cheese factories, 28 stables and cow-houses, 8 machinery shed, 94 wheat silos, 8 sheep pens, 52 school buildings, 10 village building rooms, 8 baths, 6 clinics, and so on...

cially were shot for "spying," the Jewish collective farms were abolished, and the colleges and institutes were closed. Besides that, under Stalinist repression, a huge number of Jewish political and cultural officials fell to the "Fairness," though it should be noted that this was not a case of anti-Semitism. During this phase, equality was maintained. The best representatives of the Ukrainian, Jewish, Russian, and Georgian people (as well as others) living in the USSR were tortured and executed. The gulag swallowed millions, and the Jewish people lost famous writers and poets (for example, Isaac Babel and Osip Mandelstam), religious officials, pedagogues, artists, musicians, soldiers, engineers... Jewish life in the cities during this period was fleeing into the deep underground. In Jewish towns came an original transformation of tradition with new calls for the "Soviet man." The formula, "a boy knows the Torah well," changed to "a boy reads often." Now the founding idea of the Jewish family was no longer to educate one's children in Jewish tradition, but Soviet tradition, which was hopefully higher, if not special.

Before the Second World War, about 2.5 million Jews were living in the territory of Ukraine. About 1.4 of them were murdered during the Holocaust.

Ukraine became a "site," in which the Nazis were learning to murder hundreds of thousands of people; this was the beginning of the path to the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question." In this occupied territory of the USSR—Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltics—the Nazis commenced first mass-, and, later, wholesale murder. Men were being executed in June 1941—men and women by July. By August, they had begun to execute children. In September, in Babi Yar, the Nazis move onward to total annihilation. In these lamentably famous declarations, pasted about the streets of

Kiev on the 28th of September, they had written, "All Jews of Kiev."

From Ukraine it was possible to trace all of the "models" that the Nazis would implement towards the annihilation of all of the Jews of Europe. The "Eastern Model" was a quick, practical, and total annihilation of the population by firing squad and other methods of murder; the "Western Model" was the gradual exclusion of people from political, economic, and social life and, afterwards, concentration and deportation to death camps; the "Romanian Method" was the gradual annihilation of prison-camp populations through starvation, exposure, epidemic, and mockery of the guards. The reaction of the remaining population in these regions varied. Different methods were utilized in the propaganda for the proposal of the path to death. The goal of the Nazis was a common one—the annihilation of all Eastern European Jews. And it is a bitter necessity to establish the fact that they practically succeeded in this goal. Vasili Grossman summed up this tragic toll in his essay, "Ukraine without Jews:"

"The People were villainously slaughtered... The old artisans were villainously slaughtered..., lumberjacks, tractor drivers, cab drivers, were villainously slaughtered; water carriers, millers, bakers, cooks were villainously slaughtered...; bacteriologists and biochemists... grandmothers who didn't know how to do much besides loving their children and grandchildren... simpleminded wives who were true to their husbands... beautiful young women... university students and joyful school children... the stupid and the ugly... the humpbacked... the blind... the deaf-mute... violinists and pianists... three- and two-year-olds... seventy-year-old men with cataracts in their turbid eyes, with cold transparent fingers and quiet voices... crying infants who were eagerly suckling at their

mothers' breasts until their final moments. Everyone was villainously slaughtered; many hundreds of thousands—a million Jews in Ukraine."⁵

In the first years following the war, a few Jews received permission to open the synagogues, which had been closed in the 1920s⁶. The Jews of every city collected money for the restoration of these buildings. This is testified to in interviews taken in Kiev: "My father was a cobbler. He would regularly lay a small sum of money aside to take to the synagogue." "And my father was the secretary of the district committee. Therefore, he would transfer the money to his mother, and she would secretly take it to her aunt and she would transfer it to the synagogue through her neighbor." This was a short revival period for Jewish self-awareness in the USSR, a sense of "victory over Nazism," and the understanding that "we have survived, and Hitler is no more."

The next phase of Stalinist anti-Semitic policy—the execution of the Jewish Anti-fascist Committee and a struggle against "cosmopolites" and "saboteurs"—beginning in 1948, demonstrated to the Jewish population of the country the hopelessness of the very idea of a "resurrection of Jewish life in Russia." That which belonged to the Jews was becoming an indication of withered hopes. And, since this policy harkens back to that of the Nazis in the 1930s, it was forbidden to speak about the Holocaust. In all historical documents, which had been prepared for dissemination, the murder of the Jews became the murder of "peaceful Soviet citizens."

5 V. Grossman. "Ukraine Without Jews." "Enichait." 1943. Cited from S. Markish, "Babel and Others," Kiev, 1996, v. 54.

6 Based on the evaluation of the Israeli professor, M. Alshuler; after the Second World War, more than 120 synagogues were opened in the USSR.

For many who had survived the Holocaust, these events precisely became key for the future refusal of Jewish self-identification. If it was possible, parents would give their children non-Jewish last names. After Stalin's death came the period of the "thaw"—a small historical span of time during which democratic ideas penetrated the totalitarian state. People, having overcome their fears, arose with a small part of the truth, including the tragedy of the Jewish people during the Second World War, which penetrated into social consciousness. Literary and musical works—the poems of Evtushenko, the music of Shostakovich, the prose of Solzhenitsyn and Grossman—formed a public wealth of information, the dissemination of which followed Stalin's death in 1953. A democratic dissident movement was being conceived which several Jews took part in.

However, after a short interval of time, state policy began to change, and the term, "the struggle with world Zionism," began appeared in the state lexicon in connection with the schism of diplomatic relations with the young state of Israel. Now, any Jew found expressing democratic ideas could be prosecuted along these lines. This is what the authorities did with any attempt towards the public (or even private) manifestation of Jewish life. It became a crime to study Hebrew and Jewish traditions, not to speak of leaving for Israel. Jewish life disappeared underground. A specific group of people known as the "Refusers," who waited years for permission to depart for Israel, came onto the scene. As a result, they were not given jobs in the USSR, but were also refused this permission to leave.

It cannot be said that Jewish life disappeared altogether (the Jewish people has a unique ability to survive difficult times), but it did indeed disappear from the "public space" into the sphere of personal, familial, or, at the

very least, informal relationships. The legacies of the vanished Yiddish culture could be found in the small cities (formerly "shtetly") of Ukraine, where both old and young spoke Yiddish, and where Jewish holidays were more or less observed openly and not highly threatened by the authorities (who were far distant). In the large cities, the synagogues (even if they hadn't been closed) functioned under undivided attention of the KGB; as a result, the official community, as a rule, included a small quantity of elderly people, since the appearance of a young person could spell their end of their careers, an exclusion from the Komsomol academy, unpleasantness as a result of the party line, and so on. This policy was meant to lead to a swift assimilation, but, in the usual fashion, the state itself obstructed the initiative. The "fifth box" in the Soviet passport, which indicated nationality, did not allow people to forget about their Jewishness—it was frequently the reason why people were not accepted into the university or a "closed" institution. A portion of Soviet Jews, who didn't want to make peace with the anti-Semitic policies of the state, attempted to emigrate. Only a few managed to do so. During the period between 1948 and 1985, somewhere around 290,000 people emigrated from the Soviet Union. The majority of those remaining made an effort to exist through loyalty to the state, a small group among them, the so-called "Refusers," retreating to a life of active dissidence. The state dealt with them using the slogan of "struggle with world Zionism," and, at this time, any manifestation of Jewish life could fall under this idea and result in unpleasantness. Simply admitting to being a Jew was quite a brave act.

Of course, a socialist state could not openly declare such policies. During Brezhnev's time, there was one Jewish state-sanctioned theater

in Chernivtsi; in Kiev there was a commemorative plaque made out to the “Proletarian Jewish Writer Sholom-Aleikhiy.” However, this is where the state’s loyalty for the Jews ended. There was a strict “percentage norm” in every university that had not been publicly declared, even though it was regularly observed. Legal chaos ruled the country. At some point, they began to accept this or any form of higher education available. And graduates from Kiev went to Tver’ or Ufa in order to receive their education.

II. 25 YEARS OF JEWISH LIFE IN AN INDEPENDENT UKRAINE

At the end of the 1980s, during Perestroika, a new phase of Jewish life was beginning that could be defined as an “escape from the underground.” In the USSR and, consequently, in Ukraine, the persecution of “Zionist leadership,” the study of Hebrew, and research of the Holocaust was discontinued. As a result, there was a revival of Jewish life in Ukraine. Already by 1988, the Kiev Association of Jewish Culture and the Chernivitsy Fund for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries (previously the Chernivitsi Jewish Socio-Cultural Fund) were established. From the moment that Ukraine had achieved its independence in 1991, a number of Jewish organizations in various cities and settlements experienced rapid growth. After twenty years, 288 national Jewish organizations and 290 Jewish religious societies had been registered, not to mention around 100 more Jewish philanthropic organizations and funds⁷.

A few “umbrella” organizations were founded in order to coordinate all of these smaller orga-

nizations: in 1991, Vaad (the Association of Jewish Organizations and Societies) in Ukraine; in 1992, the Jewish Council of Ukraine; in 1997, the Pan-Ukrainian Jewish Congress (PJC) and the Jewish Fund of Ukraine (JFU). In 1992, the social organization, the “Institute of Judaism,” began work which posed a whole chain of tasks in the area of preservation and research of Jewish history, culture, and art in Ukraine. This could be defined as the “internal vector” of the development of Jewish life in Ukraine. However, it is unlikely that these impressive successes could have been achieved without an “external” vector of development. At this time in Ukraine, after half a century of interruption, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (Joint) made a return, after which both the Commission for Jewish Material Searches in Germany (the Claims Conference) and the Jewish Federation of New York, the “United Jewish Appeal” (UJA), were enacted and the offices of a series of foundational international Jewish organizations were opened to include the Jewish Agency of Israel, “Sokhnut,” and the largest Jewish student organization, “Gilel’.” The World Jewish Relief (WJR), the Rothschild Fund (Hanadiv) of Europe, and the Jewish Humanitarian Fund (JHF) provided a large amount of aid in the spheres of philanthropy, Jewish education, and culture.

And, of course, it is unthinkable to talk about the revival of Jewish life without its religious components. The arrival of rabbis to Ukraine, the appearance of religious schools, and the opening of synagogues were hailed as a miracle. During these twenty-five years in Ukraine, several pan-Ukrainian religious unions were formed. 123 registered societies joined the Federation of Jewish Societies of Ukraine (FJSU), 84 joined the Union of Judaist Religious Organizations of Ukraine (UJROU),

⁷ “Jewish Life in Ukraine: Achievements, Difficulties, and Priorities from the Fall of the Communist Regime to 2013.” Report from the Institute of Jewish Political Research, 2014.

and 13 joined the Pan-Ukrainian Congress of Judaist Religious Societies (PCJRS). There is even a particular organization for followers of reformist Judaism: the Religious Union of the Societies of Progressive Judaism of Ukraine (RUSPJU), which took in upwards of 50 societies. Another twenty-six officially registered religious societies are completely independent of these umbrella organizations. The most famous among them are Skvira, Bratslav, and other Hassidic movements in Ukraine. A conservative movement is actively represented in Chernovitsi and a few other cities.

The process of restitution, beginning after the dissolution of the totalitarian system and returned several synagogues back to the communities which had been transferred to various organizations during Soviet times, contributed to the revitalization of religious life around synagogues in the big cities (usually in regional centers) of Ukraine. For the first time ever, all Jewish life in the city was concentrated. However, this process affected a large portion of building which had at one point belonged to Jewish communities due to the fact that the buildings were highly involved in the infrastructure of modern cities, and sometimes due to the fact that a small-numbered Jewish community simply couldn't balance this or any construction.

New synagogues were built in small cities, which became the new universal centers of Jewish life, such as Medzhibozh, connected with the name of the founder of Hassidism, Vaal Shem Tova. Meanwhile, there is only one example of a new synagogue built in a big city—the Golden Rose synagogue in Dnepropetrovsk, which is included in the “Minora,” the first complex structure in Ukraine that houses not only a synagogue, but also a community theater, a museum of the Holocaust, and a Jewish museum. In many cities, the old

synagogue buildings, which in Soviet times were repurposed for completely different activities (from theaters and clubs to sports halls and warehouse), are today completely reconstructed for the purposes of religious communities.

In order to describe the particularities of Jewish life in Ukraine, it is necessary to answer the question of whom it is possible to call a Ukrainian Jew. In 2010, the fund, “Public Examination,” carried out a complex sociological study of Russian Jews⁸, the conceptual apparatus of which can safely be extrapolated to the whole territory of the Commonwealth of Independent States, to include Ukraine. The authors proposed a construction based on the concept of Jewish Peoplehood. The criteria are as follows:

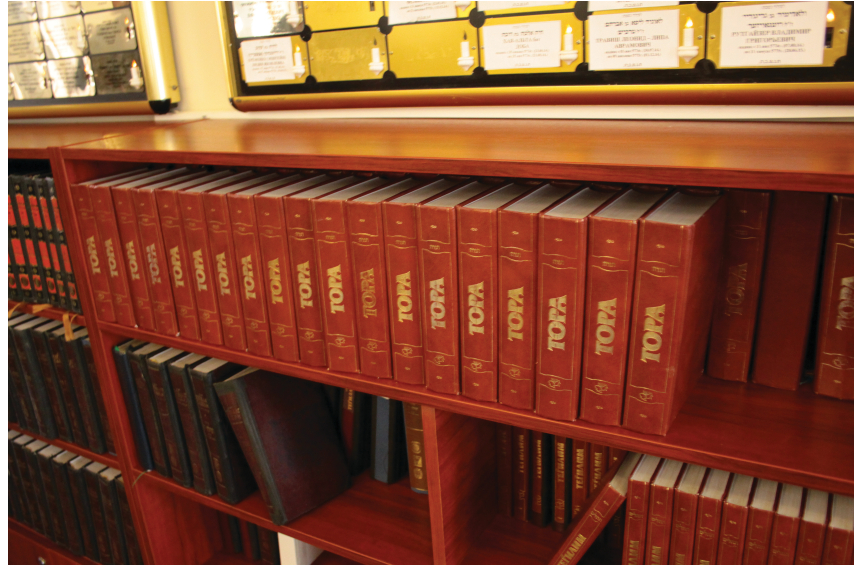
- Liberal criterion—Jews who consider themselves to be Jews.
- Halakhic criterion—Jews who inherit their identity from the maternal line and have accepted Judaism in the traditional ways.
- Criterion of the law of returns—Jews who have either a parent or a grandparent who is Jewish.
- Criterion of Jean Paul Sartre—Jews whom other people consider to be Jewish.
- Formula of the verdict of the High Court of Israel concerning Daniel's brother—Jews whom other Jews consider to be Jewish

Now we will attempt to sort out with both statistics and entire groups with whom the aforementioned Jewish organizations have worked. Based on what is known of the final census of the population of the USSR in 1989, there were 486,000 Jews in Ukraine at this time. This census was carried out through a

8 A. Osovtsov, I. Yakovenko. “The Jewish People in Russia: How, Why, and Who Belongs to It.” Moscow, 2011, v. 21.)

presentation of one's passport, which is to say that, as a rule, these were people whose mother and father were Jews and, in receiving their passport, had no choice but to accept this designation themselves.

The census of 2001 was carried out by survey; therefore the figure of 103,591 reflects the exact quantity of people who called themselves Jews, or those who would fall into the first group of the Jewish Peoplehood criteria. The target group composed of Orthodox Jewish communities falls into the second group—the Halakhic Jews. The third group, up to the beginning of the current war (up until 2013) was evaluated at approximately 300,000 people, who make up the majority of non-religious Jewish organizations. The fourth group is imaginary, resulting from the stereotypes of a non-Jewish environment. Here we should denote extreme points in the field in which a wide range of opinions are spread out. This consists of two stereotypes. The first is a negative one: “all bad people in Ukraine are Jews.” Over periods of time, people have included Jews such as Yushenko, Yanukovich, and Timoshenko into this list, who are influential and notorious representatives of the political elite. The second stereotype sounds something like this: “All of the smart, good, and talented residents of Ukraine are Jewish.” Within the last year, the direction has been constantly shifted to the positive stereotype, but the danger that the dwindling economic and political situation will revert this process towards the negative direction has not been ruled out. The fifth criterion is the most



Brodsky Synagogue. Kiev. 2014. Photo Carmen Scheide

relevant to Israel, and there is not much sense in examining it with regard to Ukraine.

Now we will examine how the “Ukrainian Jew” fits into “Jewish life in Ukraine. In order to do this, we will distinguish a few positions which unify Jews into a single people and then analyze each one:

Religious life in today's Ukraine is one of the greatest miracles for former Soviet citizens. If it were only possible today to carry out an interview of the Ukrainian Jews, for example, in 1978, and to ask them whether it would be possible to open a synagogue in the Kiev Bell Theater (which, by the way, it was originally built as in 1898), no one would answer affirmatively. Not a single analyst, scholar, or even a romantic dreamer would have been able then to imagine that there would be six synagogues operating in Kiev at the beginning of the 21st century. None of the Jews—the engineers, doctors, and students—would even be able to imagine that they would even be able to visit this synagogue regularly for prayer or Jewish holidays. A description of the scene: the Ukrainian president is lighting a meno-

rah in one of the central squares of Kiev—it would sound like a fantasy to the residents of the country. However, synagogues are operating today in Ukraine, along with yeshivas, Talmud-torahs, and Jewish religious schools for boys and girls. Young rabbis, shoikhets, and melameds have appeared—no longer from America or Israel, but from Ukrainian cities. There are permanent rabbis in more than thirty cities. All over Ukraine, they are building mikvahs—pools used for ritual bathing.

And although only fifteen percent of the Jewish population takes part in religious life, the nearby presence of the religious community and the rabbi have effectively changed Jewish life in the country. Today, many Ukrainian Jews have a notion of Jewish tradition and from time to time visit the synagogue.

Statistics are unexpectedly showing us that Orthodox Judaist communities are more attractive to local sponsors and older Jews who regularly visit the synagogue than to the community; it would seem more understandable for the post-atheist society than for reformist Judaism. However, analysts have turned their attention to the fact that, as a rule, sponsors are not too personally submerged in religious life, but Orthodox Judaism looks highly convincing for investors. For older people, the appearance of black hats and ear-locks serves as a sort of anchor in the historical consciousness, connecting them with the traditional village Jews of bygone centuries, with family traditions or folkloric history.

Reformist communities are more oriented towards youth and the middle-aged. They are introducing bold innovative methods of work in an attempt to attract intellectuals—historians, writers, artists, and those entering into religious life in the 21st century. They are also making an effort to attract members of non-Jewish families in order to widen the Jewish

community of Ukraine. And, even though the material basis of Jewish reformist communities is weaker today than that of the Orthodox Jews, more and more local sponsors in the last few years have come to their support, both materially and intellectually. The process of restitution has played a huge role in the revival of religious life in the country. Three wonderful synagogues in Kiev (the Brodsky, Schekavitsky, and Galitsky synagogues) have immediately become centers of Jewish religious life and education. Moreover, in coordination with synagogues in Lvov, Kirovograd, Ivano-Frankovsk, Vinnitsa, and hundreds of other cities in Ukraine, they have become an object of interest for millions of international tourists (to include non-Jews).

Jewish philanthropy, an integral feature in the leadership of Jewish communities all over the world and in all periods, was completely banished from the life of the Soviet Jews by the 1930s. But, immediately after Perestroika, it was precisely this that signaled the return of Jewish life to the nation. By the middle of the 1990s, philanthropic funds and cultural organizations were being founded. The social aid system for those in need was improved. They created pensions for boys and girls from disadvantaged families, opened soup kitchens, organized food rations for pensioners and the disabled, and greatly aided veterans of the Second World War.

It is important that these philanthropic organizations, in paying such great attention to material aid, did not forget about the cultural demands of the wards Chesed. Lectures, excursions, and a number of creative workshops returned a sense of the joy of life and the possibility of creative work to the older people. Cheseds are frequently the main centers of Jewish life in a region, where there are usually small, but rich museum exhibits, and where

many educational and enlightening projects are conducted. As a result, it is here that those wishing to understand the inner-workings of Ukrainian Jewish communities come, as it serves as a sort of “mirror” of Jewish life.

Both religious and non-religious Jews agree that Jewish tradition has an objective source—the Torah. However, in the case of the banning of the Torah in the USSR after the revolution, Jewish tradition was compelled to disappear in its entirety. However, this did not come to pass. There was something left that was preserved in Jewish families. In order to understand this, we must turn to Hebrew, in which two terms are used: “masorete Israel,” from the verb, “masar”—“to convey,” and “moreshet Israel,” from the verb, “yarash”—“to inherit.”

The Jewish inheritance consists of books, one’s grandfather’s old prayer shawl and yarmulke, a chanukkiyah or mezuzah that has been preserved in an old closet among forgotten things—that which can provoke questions and, in the process of answering, reveal the main essence of Jewish tradition: “Tell my son about this.” “Tell about” and “convey” are two points of footing which allow the people to survive like the people of any environment. Interviews taken of people who have experienced the “zone of silencing,” which is to say those who lived under Soviet authority, allow us to distinguish several generations. For those born in the 1930s, their parents or, at the very least, their grandmother and grandfather, were religious, “traditional” Jews; therefore, in spite of the absolute secularity of the period, these people remembered something about Jewish holidays, saw their grandfathers praying, and sometimes even went to synagogue on Yom-Kippur and ate matzo. But this no longer kept them from eating salo and decorating eggs on Easter. The generations born in the 1950s were

already confused by the words, “Shabbat” and “Pesach,” and their Jewishness was characterized by its clash with the anti-Semitic predilections of its neighbors in the courtyard in light of their unsuccessful attempts to get into institutes or to set themselves up with a job.

Of course, there were exceptions. In a few small cities (formerly “shtetly”) in Ukraine, Ukrainian families spoke Yiddish and buried their dead in Jewish cemeteries; boys recited the Kaddish (a memorial prayer) and grandmothers taught their granddaughters how to make gefilte fish and how to boil kosher chicken bouillon. It was still possible in the 50s to feel the spirit of the shtetl in cities such as Balta and Shargorod. The final traces, along with the last older Jews, were discovered by research enthusiasts in the middle of the 1980s. Alas, the “new time” dictated its own rhythms; today, there are practically no Jews in these villages, but the “village traditions” are preserved by the elderly Jews who are living in big cities today. Interviews taken by the Institute of Judaism and films shot by researchers from St. Petersburg and Israel allow us to catch a glimpse of this all but vanished world which, while bitter and destitute, gave birth to such writers as Sholom-Aleikhem, Menakhem Moikher Sforim, Shmuel Joseph Agnon, and Simon Vizental, the founders of Hassidism, musicians, artists, sculptors, and inventors.

Emmanuel Levinas⁹, one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century, noted that the existence of Jews who want to remain Jews, even beyond any connection with the state of

9 Emmanuel Levinas—December 30th, 1905 (January 12th, 1906); Kovno, 25th of December, 1995, Paris—was a French philosopher. He was born in Lithuania, studied in an academy in Kharkov, and then in Lithuania (Kovno) and Germany (at Freiburg University under the direction of Edmund Husserl and at Martin Heidegger’s seminars).

Israel, wholly depends on Jewish education: only this can justify and support such an existence¹⁰. Over the last quarter century, a new system of Jewish education has been being built absolutely from scratch. Furthermore, while there is still no singular system, practically every type of Jewish educational institution exists and is well known in other nations of the diaspora: around forty Jewish schools, more than a dozen kindergarten schools, sixty Sunday schools, eight yeshivas, and seventy ulpan for the study of Hebrew, which are frequented by upwards of 10,000 children and adults in total.

Formal education, represented by schools and lyceums, offers an advanced course of Jewish subjects to students along with the state curriculum. Once children graduate these schools, they receive diplomas of the state standard and are completely prepared to pass entry examinations at higher learning institutions. Some of the parents whose children attend Jewish school believe that the quality of education there is higher than in the state schools based on certain factors such as the combination of the state curriculum and Jewish subjects, the quality of education, the instruction of foreign languages (including Hebrew), and a rich extra-curricular program.

However, a very low percentage of Jewish children in Ukraine are attending Jewish schools. The majority of them attend regular Ukrainian learning institutions. And, in order to attract their attention to Jewish history and traditions and to engage them in Jewish life, a strong system of informal education has been developed. Jewish aid organizations are operating summer camps for children and families. The Institute of Judaism, the Ukrainian Center

for the Study of the History of the Holocaust, the Center of Jewish Education, and several other organizations are conducting seminars that shed light on the various aspects of Jewish history and culture.

In the early years of the resurgence of Jewish life in the former Soviet Union, this sort of leadership was extremely relevant, as everything within the frame of formal and informal Jewish education was an absolute novelty for the majority of students. However, after twenty years, Ukraine came up against the problems that Emmanuel Levinas mentioned back in the 50s in relation to Jewish education in France. This problem remains today in Germany and other European countries: traditions, joint holidays, and classes on Jewish history are great, but are apparently insufficient for the preservation of Jewish education, which, in the opinion of Levinas, is inseparable from the research of Judaism and Jewish science.

At the same time, a small number of youths, even amongst the students of Jewish schools, somehow connect their future with Judaism. There is a catastrophically low number of intellectuals capable of sparking ideas of the necessity of Jewish education in a sufficient amount of parents and children. Centers of Jewish education are working on preparing specialists for the development of Judaist science. Programs such as "Sambation" for students and international schools such as "Sefer" have already contributed several interesting researchers and enthusiasts to the country who have formed a circle of interested youths around them. We hope that the concept of "academic Judaism" will soon cease to be exotic in Ukraine, and will take its lawful place in international academia.

Numerous Jewish organizations are concerned with informal education in a vastly wide spectrum: family camps, excursions,

¹⁰ Emmanuel Lévinas. *Reflexions sur l'éducation juive : Les Cahiers de l'Alliance israelite universelle* n. 58 (1951)

“schools on wheels¹¹,” educational seminars, among which *Limud*¹² occupies a special place, and much else. This system envelops a wide circle of Ukrainian Jewry, into which the concept of “Jewish education” only reentered the system of identification in the 1990s. The gladly devote their free time to participation in Jewish educational projects and are grateful attendants of lectures, excursions, studios, and patrons of theater and music collectives.

Three vectors of development can be distinguished within the wide field of “Jewish education”—religious, culturological, and the research and teaching of the history of the Holocaust. Religious education is carried out by rabbis and concentrated around the resurrected synagogues of distinct orders; culturological demands are satisfied by young Jewish organizations whose goal is to return a part of the people’s history and culture back to them.

III. TEACHING THE HISTORY OF THE HOLOCAUST

The history of the Holocaust immediately took a unique place in the system of Jewish education, quickly exiting its framework. The history of the Holocaust is a part of Ukrainian history and pedagogy, a method of understanding the essence of totalitarianism, and an instrument for the understanding of good and evil in society and humankind.

The first research conducted on the Holocaust in Ukraine began in the 1980s. The theme of “Ha-Shoah” became a subject of interest for Ukrainian Jews—both scholarly historians

and independent enthusiasts—teachers, engineers, journalists, and retired servicemen¹³. Work is carried out in the search for places of mass annihilation; the first articles begin to appear in newspapers along with small exhibitions in Jewish communities and monuments commemorating the names of those who perished. This is managed mainly thanks to the efforts of individual enthusiasts, sometimes supported by international funds or separate foreign sponsors.

The breakthrough of a wide awakening of interests in this them became the project of the “Survivors of the Ha-Shoah,” which is remembered in the mass consciousness as the project of Steven Spielberg. Interviewers were being prepared in Ukraine beginning in 1996. More than 3.5 thousand interviews, taken in Ukraine, forced people to reflect (possibly for the first time in their lives) on the highly incomplete picture of the events of the Second World War which had been stamped into their memories. In small towns, the very fact that an interviewer and a film crew had arrived contributed to the arousal of interest this long-open subject. The term, “Holocaust,” was gradually becoming understandable to residents of the country.

Towards the end of the 1990s, scientific research on the history of the Catastrophe in Ukraine was beginning. A number of efforts cropped up in relation to the regional particularities of the Holocaust in the occupied territory of Ukraine; for the first time, the question of righteousness in Ukraine was raised; the fates of individual victims were documented,

11 “Schools on Wheels” were expeditionary trips combining excursive, research, and creative work. They were regularly held in Ukraine for Jewish youth groups.

12 *Limud* is a Jewish education conference that has become a tradition in Ukraine, including lectures, training sessions, workshops, and other educational activities.)

13 F. Levitas defended the first doctor’s dissertation on the history of the Holocaust... There are works by historians and researchers in various regions of Ukraine—Y. Honigsmann (Lvov), Z. Kovba, S. Yelisavetsky, Y. Smilianskaya (Kiev), M. Tyagly (Simferopol), L. Solovka (Ivano-Frankovsk), and others.

the names of the perished were registered, and martyrologies were released. An informational basis was formed and, gradually, a team of historians and pedagogues formed who were capable of teaching the subject of the Catastrophe in higher academies on a methodical level. In 1998, based on an initiative launched by the Institute of Judaism, an organization of the first seminars for Ukrainian school teachers, students, and professors of higher learning institutions and universities began to take shape. The main difficulty was due to the fact that the pedagogues had never studied the history of the Holocaust, neither in school, nor in university, and had not frequently heard anything about it. Literature on the subject was pitifully little and motivation practically non-existent. In preliminary interviews, the question of why it was necessary to study the history of the Jews was frequently implied and occasionally voiced. In connection with this, the main task was to include the subject of the Holocaust in the historical memory of the Ukrainian pedagogical elite and to maximize as much as possible the dissemination of information with regard to it. Afterwards came a transition to the formulation and solution of key pedagogical tasks, which allowed the possibility of deciding how to approach the theme of the Holocaust. These tasks were being decided by the Institute of Judaism, along with the Ukrainian Center of the Study of Holocaust History and several other Ukrainian and international organizations. As a result of all of this effort, a group of specialized pedagogues came to exist who were capable of teaching Holocaust history in a world context and successfully working on international projects.

One such project, known as the "Formation of Pan-European Pedagogical Space in the Process of Teaching the History of the Holo-

caust¹⁴," was carried out by the Institute of Judaism in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, Welfare, and Sports (Netherlands). A group of pedagogues and students from Ukraine, the Netherlands, and Belgium conducted two 6-day seminars in Ukraine and, later, in the Netherlands. Participants of the project made a list of fundamental goals relating to the comprehension, study, and teaching of the Holocaust in the 21st century, on the basis of a single European pedagogical space. The mutual labors of pedagogues from three countries allowed a widening of the spectrum of questions raised about the study of the Catastrophe, an improvement of the participants' factual knowledge, and the identification of vectors of collaborative development, which could result not only in new methods of teaching, but also a path to the formation of a tolerant society.

In speaking of the Holocaust, it is impossible not to ask the question: "who were these hundreds of thousands of people killed in Ukraine?" And this is a very important transition to the next them relating to the Jewish history of Ukraine. Only ten years ago, teachers from smaller cities, as a rule, knew nothing about the Jewish history of their villages, of which the Jews made up anywhere from thirty to seventy percent. After the seminars, expeditions, and "schools on wheels, conducted by Kiev's Institute of Judaism, these teachers returned to their cities and saw the history of their land with different eyes. Information was beginning to be disseminated in waves, sometimes even without our help. Surprising events were taking place. School children and their teachers were finding witnesses and peo-

14 Marco Otten (Arnhem), Julia Smilianskaya (Kiev). The Formation of a Single European Pedagogical Space in Teaching the History of the Holocaust.

ple who had saved Jews during the Holocaust, taking interviews, recording unique histories, and shooting films. The most important thing was that they were building up the history of their own towns.

Why is this important for Ukraine today? The point is that more than 2000 Jewish graves were preserved in places where Jews had long ceased to live. Whether these graveyards will disappear from the face of the earth or be preserved for future generations depends on the non-Jewish populations of these cities. Such a situation arises with synagogues, the unique Jewish structure of the shtetl, and Jewish quarters in the cities. Therefore, it is necessary to convince not the government (this would be useless at the moment), but Ukrainian civil society that the Jewish legacy of their cities is the very richness, history, and memory of them. It will be to the non-Jewish portion of society that people come from all over the world to see a synagogue from the 16th century or the unique threads on the matzevahs (Jewish tombstones). Therefore, in order to look after the Jewish legacy of their cities, it will not only require Jews (who do not live in these cities), but the non-Jews themselves, because they are the ones who are living there. In some places, people already understand this but, in many, not many people do. But our current school children have already begun to grow into specialists of Judaism who fulfill the demand for a group of "intellectuals."

The theme of the Holocaust, while remaining an integral part of Jewish education and self-identification, has ceased to be a subject of interest exclusive to the Jewish community and is gradually entering the historical memory of the Ukrainian people as an essential component of the history of Ukraine. The conversation of the Catastrophe assists in the formation of new cultures of memory, without which a

new Ukrainian historiography, pedagogy of trust, or an updated civil sense of responsibility are impossible.

The process of understanding the essence of the Holocaust contributes to the creation of civil society which is aware of the dangers of totalitarianism, both for the individual and society as a whole. It helps to restore an understanding of the value of human life, to form humanitarian principles in society, and to reduce its level of aggression. The mechanism of the formation of totalitarian thinking, which we have disclosed to the participants of our projects as a historical study, has become a bloody reality in Ukraine. And, hopefully, courses on the Holocaust will help someone find the strength to fight for his country, survive in the current war in Ukraine, and preserve humanity, without which a peaceful life is unthinkable.

IV. MAIDAN AND THE JEWS

From the first days of resistance against the authorities and "Berkut" at Maidan, Jews have stood alongside Ukrainians, Russians, Georgians, and Tatars. They are engineers and doctors, culturologists and philologists, students, and pensioners. In January 2014, historian and politologist Vyacheslav Likhaichev wrote of his Jewish friends who had found themselves at the barricades:

"It seems to me that there is a special reason for Jews to go to Maidan. A representative of one of the American Jewish philanthropic funds once explained to me why his organization not only gives money to community activities: any project working towards the restoration of justice and aid for the people is a Jewish project. The fund was prepared to finance programs providing equal access to wheelchair users to state services, because justice and mercy are Jewish values. Although

this sounds like pretentious word juggling, it is actually an approach based on the American Jewish concept of correcting the world, "Tikkun Olam." There is a shade of eschatological messianism in this type of charity. I would like to think that, among those employed by these bandit authorities that are attacking protesters, there are no Jews. Because, to sell your soul for 200 grivny, to beat and intimidate civil activists is not a Jewish value, as the representative of the fund would say. But, among those rising to meet the day at Maidan, stiffened by the cold and a lack of sleep, the Jews can absolutely be found¹⁵.

Among the killed at Maidan, now known as the "Heavenly 100," is Joseph Schilling from Drogobych (Lvov region). He had been 61 years old. Two daughters and four granddaughters survived him. A sniper killed him with a precise shot to the head near the October Palace. Alexander Sherbanyuk was from Chernovitsi, the cradle of Ukraine's world-famous poets, writers, and musicians. He was a construction worker. They buried him in embroidery and laid a gas mask, helmet, and skullcap in his coffin. He was a member of a community known as "Beit Simcha." Three children survived him. His son was going to a Jewish school. The Kharkiv Eugene Kotlyar was thirty-three years old. He was known among liberal activists and ecologists, who struggled against the annihilation of parks being carried out by the city's bandit authorities. He worked in the field of industrial alpinism¹⁶.

Today is a terrifying period of Ukrainian history. But the residents of the country hope that

the war will end. This chance, paid for with blood, will be realized and Ukraine will become a normal, civilized state. And then the Jewish community of Ukraine will flourish and Jewish life will continue. undesirable to make an alternative prognosis...

Translated by Charlie Smith

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yuliana Smilianskaya, Director of the Institute for Jewish Studies in Kiev.

e-mail: kievkon [at] gmail.com

¹⁵ "The Jewish Battalion of the Heavenly Hundred." 09.03.2014. <http://eajc.org/page279/news43756.htm>

¹⁶ Vyacheslav Likhachev. "Jews at Maidan: Why and What For?" 01.23.2014.

<http://booknik.ru/today/all/evrei-na-mayidane-pochemu-i-dlya-chego/>